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SUBJECT: CORRECTED VERSION: ISLAM IN SOUTHERN CHAD

¶1. (SBU) Summary: What is the status of Islam in southern Chad, a relatively densely populated area but traditionally largely Christian or animist? Embassy N'Djamena PAO and Arabic/Muslim Outreach Specialist set out to answer this question, at least anecdotally, during two trips over a three-week period. They found thriving centers of Islamic education, and over 50 mosques and Koranic schools, funded by half-a-dozen different Islamic organizations with various affiliations. Curricula varied widely, from purely Koranic memorization to programs of literature, art, and mathematics. The economic upturn surrounding Chad's new oil project in the South has drawn Muslim trading communities from the North into major southern cities, and Islam is flourishing there. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Chad's religious demographic is described by a horizontal axis dividing the country into a largely Muslim center/north and a largely Christian and animist south. For centuries, Muslims have moved through the South in search of land and water for their herds (transhumance). In more recent times, Christian churches have begun to appear in larger towns in the North where ethnically southern government bureaucrats live. In the South, mosques appear along major transportation routes where Muslim traders operate.

¶3. (SBU) Embassy N'Djamena PAO, along with and FSN Arabic/Muslim Outreach Specialist, recently toured

southern Chad and met with Muslim leaders, Imams, and Islamic educators, along the 1000 kilometer road connecting N'Djamena to Moundou and Sarh. Islam is thriving in southern Chad, with mosques and Koranic schools in even the smallest villages, and numerous examples of southerners from traditionally Christian or animist ethnic groups having converted to Islam. The South has seen some positive economic signs over the last five years with the arrival of the World Bank-financed, ExxonMobil-led oil project, now pumping some 150,000 barrels a day along a 1000 km pipeline to the coast of Cameroon. This project has brought some growth to local economies along the main road from N'Djamena to Moundou Q Chad's southern economic capital Q and on to Doba (where the oil projects are based) and Sarh (where cotton and sugar production dominate). Local commerce appears to be growing, at least in some sectors, now that more southerners have a regular salary and some disposable income. As in much of west and central Africa, traders and merchants are predominantly Muslim, and the economic upswing has brought ever-larger groups of northern Muslims to the South. With them have come madrassas and Koranic schools where their children are educated, mosques where they worship, and an influx of Islamic charities and NGOs of various orientations, who finance the schools, build the mosques, dig wells, and build clinics.

Muslim leaders in the South

NDJAMENA 00000508 002 OF 005

¶4. (SBU) Chad's Muslim community is organized around a centralized leadership body, headquartered in N'Djamena, called the High Islamic Council. Led by a dynamic presidentially-appointed Grand Imam, Sheikh Hassan Hissein Abakar, the Council plays a very active role in governing all Muslim-related activities in Chad, from monitoring the work of Islamic charities and NGOs, to developing curricula for Islamic schools, to advising and even reprimanding Imams on the content of their Friday sermons. Grand Imam Sheikh Abakar appoints regional Imams, who oversee regional High Islamic Councils in most of Chad's larger cities Q a system that corresponds roughly but not exactly to Chad's regional distribution of governors. These regional Grand Imams are the spiritual leaders of Muslims in their districts, and along with sultans in the North and center, and animist traditional leaders in the South, exert significant influence over their followers.

¶5. (SBU) Chad's two largest southern towns, Moundou and Sarh, both have High Islamic Council branches. In Moundou (population exceeds 150,000), Imam Mahamat Tahir Abdoulmamout heads the Council. A genial man with a gentle manner, Imam Tahir appears to be in his late 50s or early 60s. He is a northerner, educated mainly in N'Djamena, well cultured, and fluent in French and classical Arabic. Like many Chadian Imams, Tahir is a Sufi. He described his main goal in Moundou as peaceful co-habitation among all religions, and seems to have had some success in his quest, as Moundou has not recently seen religious conflict common in the late 1990s. He is active in the promotion of Arabic-language education in the region. In addition, he apparently has a good number of Sufi contacts and colleagues in West Africa, including the well-known Sheikh Hassan Ali Cisse of Kaolack, Senegal, as well as contacts in the United States. In his conversation, PAO encouraged Tahir's efforts at peaceful co-existence between faiths, and presented the Imam with a number of IIP publications such as "Muslims in the United States."

¶6. (SBU) Sarh's High Islamic Council is headed by Imam Oumar Abdal Rudjal, who is much older and in the twilight of his career. He spoke only a few words during our hour-

long meeting, seeming at points to drift into reverie. The council has an articulate and dynamic spokesperson, Mahmoud Kheraddine Abakar, who engaged us in French, classical Arabic, and even some English. As had the Grand Imam in Moundou, the spokesperson in Sarh mentioned the council's focus on strengthening relations with Sarh's Christian community, describing their goal to "deepen the concept of peaceful coexistence between religions."

Islamic Education in the South

¶7. (SBU) The High Islamic Council compiles some basic data on Islamic schools throughout the country (names, locations and number of students). In addition, UNICEF

NDJAMENA 00000508 003 OF 005

recently completed a nation-wide study on Islamic education in Chad. Outside of these two sources, there is little information on Islamic education in Chad. Thus the basic goal of the trip: to identify schools along the major southern axis, and visit a number of them to have an idea about their curricula and to establish contact between them and the Embassy. The data presented below are anecdotal, but paint a representative picture of Islamic education in southern Chad.

¶8. (SBU) On the roughly 500 kilometer stretch of road from N'Djamena to Moundou, PAO and Muslim saw 51 mosques, 32 between N'djamena and Moundou, and 19 between Moundou and Sarh. Each small mosque includes a school for teaching Arabic, the Koran, and basic Islamic studies. We saw 51 schools. Most mosques and schools receive funding from Islamic non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The largest of these operating in the South, based on our anecdotal survey, is the "International Organization for Islamic Invocation", a Libyan Islamic NGO. The "Red Crescent", funded by the UAE, is also present, as is the Kuwaiti "African Muslim Agency." Projects sponsored by the Wahabist-oriented "Islamic Forum" can also be found, especially in Kournari village, near Mandalia, in Kambarou village south of Loumia, and in Bessada village, near the oil-producing region of Doba. Other Wahabist-oriented NGOs operating in the South include the "Al Bir International Charitable Organization" (apparently funded by individual Saudi contributions) and the "Organization of Islamic Relief," a Chadian Wahabist NGO associated with Dr. Ahmat Mahamat Hagggar, former head of the Chadian chapter of WAMY and former president of the Chadian chapter of Ansar al-Sunna.

¶9. (SBU) The al-Azhar mission, funded by the Egyptian government, provides approximately eighty Egyptian Koranic school teachers Q all men Q who teach in half-a-dozen schools around Chad, including their three main schools in N'Djamena, Abeche, and Sarh. The al-Azhar school in Sarh, adjacent to the Grand Mosque, has 18 Egyptian teachers and approximately 200 students, both primary and secondary levels. The school follows the Egyptian national school curriculum, supplementing regular courses in math, literature, and history, with Koranic recitation classes. All classes had both girls and boys, with girls outnumbering boys in most rooms. In a high-school level literature class, the professor told us that he was teaching "romantic poetry" to his students so that they "could better express their feelings." The Arabic grammar instructor told us he was using the "American method" to teach language. In addition to their Egyptian instructors, students are taught French and social studies by two Chadian teachers provided by the Ministry of Education. In the primary-level Koranic recitation course we observed, girls led while boys repeated. According to the instructor, this helped girls learn leadership skills. The school has plans to teach English, and requested Embassy assistance in paying for teachers and purchasing books.

The al-Azhar mission has been in Sarh since 1996.
Students whose families can afford it pay approximately 10

NDJAMENA 00000508 004 OF 005

USD per year to attend the school.

¶10. (SBU) Sheikh Amir Ousman, a dynamic Imam who enjoys good relations with the regime, and converted to Islam in his youth, founded the Mabrouka Center outside of Sarh in 1991 Q by his telling, the center began with him and four colleagues camping under a tree and studying the Koran. Over the last 16 years, the school has grown to include ten branches throughout southern Chad, the largest of which, the Mabrouka Center Dar As-Salam, is located seven kilometers outside of Sarh. Students and teachers can be seen on the road near town wearing their distinctive bright green knitted caps Q green being the color of Sufi Islam in southern Chad. The Dar as-Salam center is home to nearly 1000 students, many of whom are from other regions of the country and are housed at the school while they learn the Koran. According to Sheikh Ousman, students normally stay at the school for a maximum of three years Q the normal time it takes to memorize the entire Koran Q and then return to another local school or to a school in their home region. The Center has a number of Koranic instructors and Imams, and also employs eight teachers, seven of whom are Christian, who teach the Chadian national curriculum. Local Christian families frequently send their children to the school, as it offers the best education and facilities in the area, and Christian parents are active members of the parent-teacher association. The Center includes a primary and a middle school, and a health clinic.

Christian-Muslim Relations

¶11. (SBU) Southern Chad is traditionally an Animist and Christian heartland. However, a significant percentage of the population of larger towns is Muslim. Although a census has not been conducted since 1993, reasonable estimates put the Muslim population of both Moundou and Sarh (the two largest southern towns) at between 20 and 30 percent. Muslims are principally engaged in trade and commerce in the South, with their numbers increasing along the main road in recent years due to an influx of capital brought by the oil project. Besides trade and commerce, Muslims are also employed in transport, in the military, and in education, teaching at Koranic schools. In addition, many of the local administrators in the South governors, prefects, mayors, etc.Q are northerners who have been placed in the South. Relations between the majority-Christian populations and the minority-Muslim populations in the South are generally peaceful, according to both Christian and Muslim leaders we spoke with. However, occasional tensions do arise. In the southern town of Bebidja in 2004, for example, a commercially-motivated conflict between an ethnic Kreda (Muslim) shopkeeper and a southern (Christian) customer spun out of control and resulted in riots and several deaths. Although not inter-religious in their origins, this and other inter-community conflicts are often portrayed as inter-religious by local media and by the GOC.

NDJAMENA 00000508 005 OF 005

¶12. (SBU) Most mosques and their associated schools are built on the main road, where Muslim populations working in the commercial sector also tend to live. Some smaller villages also have a mosque built by a local leader who converted to Islam, or by an Islamic charity for the children of converts. An example of the former is found in the village of Fianga, some eighty kilometers off the main road

to Moundou towards Cameroon, where the a local administrator recently converted to Islam and subsequently built a Saudi-funded mosque. Fianga is approximately ten percent Muslim. An example of the latter is the Institute Ibni Anas in the village of Mbikou, some thirty kilometers outside of Moundou. Built by the African Muslim Agency (Kuwait), it is home to 32 students between the ages of 8 and 15. There is a separate building for female students, who number fewer than a dozen. The Institute, run by another southern convert, teaches Arabic, the Koran, and basic Islamic studies.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) Post has focused its Muslim outreach efforts primarily on northern Chad for the past few years. Some high-level Muslim leaders and educators in the South had never met a USG diplomat. Given the active Muslim communities now found in the South, it is important to promote Muslim outreach in both northern and southern Chad.

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